

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/  
FINAL SECTION 4(f) EVALUATION

# Elwood to Braidwood Track Construction Project (MP 44.60 to MP 55.50) WILL COUNTY, ILLINOIS

December 18, 2025

PUBLIC DRAFT



U.S. Department of Transportation  
**Federal Railroad Administration**



**Illinois Department  
of Transportation**

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## **Appendices**

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Appendix A - Final Mitigation and Environmental Commitments

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## **1.0 Introduction**

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The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) and Draft Section 4(f) Evaluation in July 2025 to evaluate the potential environmental impacts of the Elwood to Braidwood Track Construction Project (Project). IDOT proposes to improve passenger rail service by implementing the Elwood to Braidwood section of the Chicago to St. Louis High Speed Rail (HSR) Program. For more information on the HSR Program see Section 1.1 of the EA.

FRA and IDOT prepared the EA to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 USC § 4231 et seq.). FRA makes this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Final Section 4(f) Evaluation based on the EA and consideration of public and agency comments in compliance with NEPA, FRA's NEPA regulations (23 C.F.R. part 771), and other related laws and regulations.

### **1.1 Project Description**

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The proposed Project includes the following:

- A second track added creating one continuous second mainline track from Elwood to Braidwood.
- A maintenance access facility for the full proposed Project length.
- Replacement and widening of the Prairie Creek Bridge.
- At-grade crossing improvements to accommodate the second track.
- Drainage and 13 culvert improvements throughout the proposed Project study area.
- Positive Train Control signaling.
- Urban- and rural-style fencing in selected areas.
- Installation of retaining walls.

See Chapter 1 of the EA for a full description of the Project.

### **1.2 Project Area**

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The proposed Project study area spans a 9.59-mile-long corridor in Will County along the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) mainline between Elwood and Braidwood, Illinois (approximately MP 44.60 to MP 55.50) and is nearly 310 acres in size. Elwood is 54 miles south of Chicago and approximately 9 miles south of Joliet, along Illinois Route 53 (IL-53) and to the east of I-55. Braidwood is 12.5 miles south of Elwood along IL-53. See Chapter 1 of the EA for a map of the Project study area.

## **2.0 Purpose and Need**

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The purpose of the proposed Project is to implement the Elwood to Braidwood section of the HSR Program, as set forth in the 2012 Record of Decision (ROD). The purpose of that Program is to enhance the passenger transportation network in the corridor by improving HSR passenger service, resulting in a more balanced use of different corridor travel options by diverting trips made by automobiles and air to rail. The 2012 HSR ROD decided on a second track through this portion of the corridor to meet the overall purpose of the Program. See Appendix C of the EA for more information on the HSR Program purpose and need.

The specific needs of the proposed Project area are as follows:

- Improve deteriorating or functionally obsolete components.
- Improve maintenance efficiency. In conjunction with additional train frequency, the project needs to improve maintenance access to reduce maintenance time and maintenance interference with train operations. Regular inspections or repairs require on-track access for the transport of equipment and material. Without maintenance access, there would be maintenance delays resulting from not getting track time issued by the dispatcher to transport equipment and materials and perform the work. More frequent trains would reduce the available time a dispatcher could allow equipment, materials, and workers to be on the track without interfering with train operations. More work would have to be done at night to avoid interfering with train operations, which affects workers' safety. A suspension of service for on-track equipment originating from Braidwood could consume as much as eight hours of track time. During eight daytime hours, up to five HSR trains could be affected.
- Improve the Prairie Creek Bridge at MP 49.52, which is functionally obsolete and past its useful life.
- Discourage pedestrians from crossing the tracks between grade crossings in urbanized areas.
- Address drainage deficiencies along the entire proposed Project area.

## **3.0 Selected Alternative**

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The EA identified Alternative 1B as the Preferred Alternative through an alternatives analysis and screening process. Eight build alternatives were originally developed and considered; however, two build alternatives (Build Alternative 1B and Build Alternative 2A) were ultimately carried forward for further evaluation because they would minimize permanent impacts to Section 4(f) properties. The Preferred Alternative from the EA is the Selected Alternative for this Project.

This section provides an overview of the Selected Alternative evaluated in the EA. See Chapter 2 of the EA for information on all alternatives analyzed in the EA.

### **3.1 Build Alternative 1B (Selected Alternative)**

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The Selected Alternative (Exhibit 3-1. Map of Selected Alternative) includes:

- A second mainline track would be constructed parallel to the existing track.
- The grade of the existing main track would be revised for 0.26 miles.
- A 10-foot-wide maintenance access facility with associated driveways (connecting to local roads) and turnarounds at endpoints along entire section length would be constructed.
- North of Damien Mills Road (MP 49.91), the maintenance access facility would be constructed on the west side of the existing track. South of Damien Mills Road, the access facility would be constructed on the east side of the existing track. The maintenance access facility would be used for equipment access during construction and future maintenance to help ensure on-time performance and service outcomes consistent with the HSR corridor. Tubular steel gates would be installed at the entrance to all access facility driveways to prevent trespassing by non-railroad motorized vehicles and discourage trespassing in general.
- A retaining wall would be constructed for approximately 1,500 feet on the west side of the proposed maintenance access facility, at MP 48.15. The purpose of the retaining wall is to avoid affecting an existing gas line that parallels the tracks.
- Two sections of earthen berm would be constructed to avoid and minimize impacts to the parallel NRHP-listed Illinois Route 53 (IL-53) (Alternate Route 66).
- A universal crossover would be added at three locations, signal improvements would be provided, a siding and associated turnout would be relocated for 0.55 miles, and an existing industrial siding turnout would be relocated.
- Six at-grade crossings would be revised.
- A new Prairie Creek railroad bridge and a maintenance access facility bridge span west of the Prairie Creek Bridge would be constructed.

- Previously abandoned 3,203 feet of track between Wilmington and Braidwood would be removed.
- HSR fencing along both sides of the tracks would be installed where not already provided.
- New or extended culverts would be constructed at 13 locations.

Construction is expected to occur over 18 months to 24 months and is estimated to cost \$78 million in 2023 dollars. See Section 2.3 for more details on the Selected Alternative.

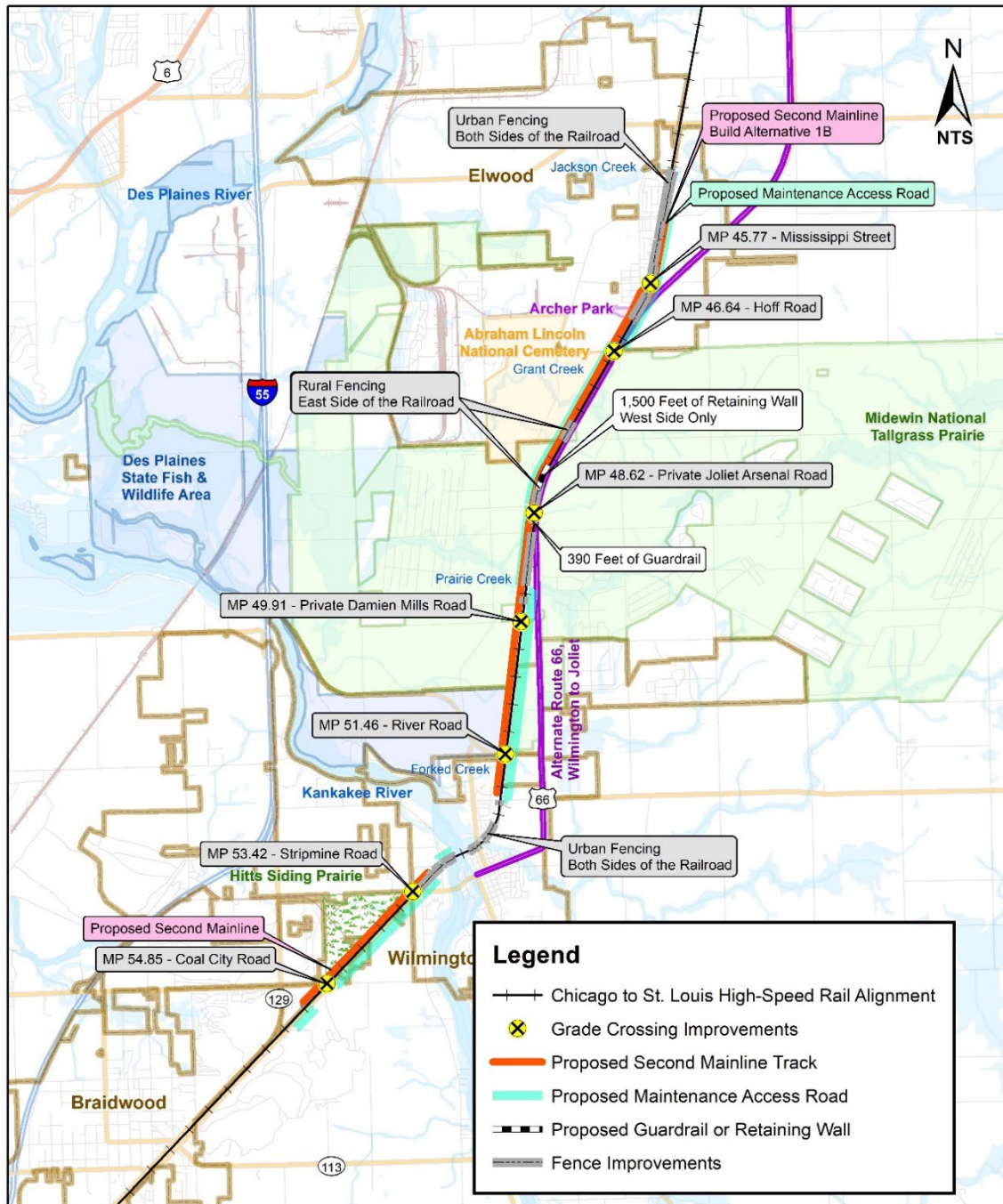
### **3.2 Identification of Selected Alternative**

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The analysis completed in the EA (Chapter 3) identifies Alternative 1B as the Preferred Alternative, which is now the Selected Alternative. The Selected Alternative avoids an adverse visual effect on Historic Route 66 by minimizing the use of retaining walls. The Selected Alternative also has a lower construction cost and shorter construction schedule than alternatives discussed in the EA. It supports the HSR Program's purpose to improve high speed passenger rail service, resulting in a more balanced use of various Chicago to St. Louis travel options.

The environmental commitments for the Selected Alternative can be found in Appendix A. Should FRA provide future financial assistance for construction of the Project, FRA will monitor compliance with these measures through FRA's oversight of the funding agreement associated with that financial assistance. IDOT has committed to ensuring and overseeing the implementation of all mitigation/commitments upon entering the Project's construction phase, including those which UPRR has primary responsibility.

Exhibit 3-1. Map of Selected Alternative





## 4.0 Coordination and Consultation

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### 4.1 Public Outreach

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FRA and IDOT distributed the EA for a 30-day public and agency review and comment period from July 9th, 2025, to August 8th, 2025. FRA extended the review and comment period to August 15th, 2025 in response to an extension request. IDOT issued a notice of availability via email to affected Federal, State, and local governments, and individuals on the Project mailing list. IDOT sent postcards to property owners who may be impacted by the proposed Project. The EA was available on IDOT's website<sup>1</sup> and FRA's project webpage<sup>2</sup>. IDOT placed notices in the Braidwood Journal, Joliet Herald, and Free Press Advocate publications. FRA and IDOT held an open house/public hearing on August 7th, 2025 at the Fossil Ridge Public Library District in Braidwood, Illinois, which was attended by 54 individuals.

During the public comment period, the US Forest Service (USFS) requested additional information on the layout of the track relative to Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (MNTP) land. IDOT prepared a report for MNTP in response to their right-of-way question and is included in Appendix C.

FRA and IDOT received comments from a comment collection page on regulations.gov<sup>3</sup>, email to FRA/IDOT, handwritten comments during the open house/public hearing, and verbal testimony to a court reporter at the open house/public hearing. FRA and IDOT received a total of 36 comments, including:

- 22 comments from individuals, businesses, or anonymous
- 5 Interest Groups
  - Environmental Law and Policy Center
  - The Nature Conservancy in Illinois
  - Openlands, The Wetlands Initiative, MidIA, Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club, Midewin Heritage Association, and Metro East Green Alliance
  - Sierra Club Illinois
  - Illinois Native Plant Society
- 9 Public Entities
  - US Forest Service, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie
  - US Environmental Protection Agency
  - US Fish and Wildlife Service
  - US Department of Interior

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<sup>1</sup> IDOT website link:

[https://idothsr.org/environmental\\_documentation/tier\\_2/elwood\\_braidwood/](https://idothsr.org/environmental_documentation/tier_2/elwood_braidwood/)

<sup>2</sup> FRA project webpage: <https://railroads.dot.gov/rail-network-development/environment/environmental-reviews/elwood-braidwood-track-construction>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.regulations.gov/docket/FRA-2025-0052>

- Amtrak
- City of Braidwood Emergency Services and Disaster Agency
- Forest Preserve District of Will County
- City of Wilmington
- Illinois Department of Natural Resources Des Plaines State Fish and Wildlife Area

Appendix C provides responses to public comments submitted during the EA review and comment period.

## 4.2 Endangered Species Act Section 7 Findings

In compliance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, FRA prepared a Biological Assessment (BA) to analyze the effects of the action on federally listed species. FRA provided the BA and requested concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on July 9, 2025. On August 8, 2025, USFWS concurred with FRA's ESA effect determinations. A summary of these findings can be found in Table 4-1. The USFWS letter can be found in Appendix C of this FONSI.

**Table 4-1. Effect Determinations of Federally Listed Species**

Species (Scientific Name)	Listing Status	Effect Determination
Hine's emerald dragonfly ( <i>Somatochlora hineana</i> )	Endangered	May affect, not likely to adversely affect
Leafy prairie clover ( <i>Dalea foliosa</i> )	Endangered	No effect
Northern long-eared bat ( <i>Myotis septentrionalis</i> )	Endangered	May affect, likely to adversely affect
Rusty patched bumble bee ( <i>Bombus affinis</i> )	Endangered	May affect, not likely to adversely affect
Sheepnose mussel ( <i>Plethobasus cyphus</i> )	Endangered	No effect
Decurrent false aster <sup>1</sup> ( <i>Boltonia decurrens</i> )	Threatened	May affect, not likely to adversely affect
Eastern massasauga ( <i>Sistrurus catenatus</i> )	Threatened	No effect
Eastern prairie fringed orchid ( <i>Platanthera leucophaea</i> )	Threatened	No effect
Lakeside daisy ( <i>Hymenoxys herbacea</i> )	Threatened	No effect
Salamander mussel ( <i>Simpsonaias ambigua</i> )	Proposed endangered	No effect
Tricolored bat <sup>2</sup> ( <i>Perimyotis subflavus</i> )	Proposed endangered	May affect, likely to adversely affect

Western Regal Fritillary ( <i>Argynnis idalia occidentalis</i> )	Proposed threatened	N/A
Whooping Crane ( <i>Grus americana</i> )	Experimental population, Non-essential	No effect
Monarch Butterfly ( <i>Danaus Plexippus</i> )	Proposed threatened	N/A

### 4.3 Section 106 Finding

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FRA completed consultation in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (54 U.S.C. § 306108) and its implementing regulations (36 CFR Part 800), which require Federal agencies to: 1) take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties that are listed in, or meet the eligibility criteria for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP); and 2) afford the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) a reasonable opportunity to comment. Section 106 also requires that agency officials work with SHPO to identify parties to participate in the Section 106 process (consulting parties).

Identification and evaluation of historic properties and assessment of effects was conducted within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) in accordance with the requirements of 36 CFR part 800.

#### Archaeological Resources

The Illinois State Archaeological Survey completed an archaeological survey and identified 11 archaeological sites within the APE, none of which warrant NRHP consideration because they lack information potential and clear association with significant historical events. No further evaluation of these sites was recommended; therefore, no NRHP-listed or eligible archaeological resources were identified in the APE for the proposed Project. The Illinois State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) concurred that there would be no archaeological historic properties affected on November 5, 2019.

#### Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery

The Selected Alternative would require a temporary construction easement within the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, which is a historic site of national, state and local significance. The Selected Alternative would not alter, directly or indirectly, the characteristics of the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery that qualify it for inclusion in the NRHP and would cause no adverse effect to the property. SHPO concurred on the Section 106 finding of effect on April 17, 2020.

IL-53 (Alternate Route 66), Wilmington to Joliet

IL53 (Alternate Route 66) was listed in the NRHP (Reference Number 06000381) in March 2006 under Criterion A. FRA made a finding of No Adverse Effect for the Selected Alternative which the Illinois SHPO concurred on April 17, 2020.

## **4.4 Final Section 4(f) Use Findings**

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Section 4(f) of the United States Department of Transportation Act (USDOT Act) of 1966 (Section 4(f)) applies to all publicly owned parks, recreation areas, wildlife and/or waterfowl refuges, and significant historic sites, whether publicly or privately owned. Section 4(f) requirements apply to all transportation projects funded or approved by USDOT. As a USDOT agency, FRA must comply with Section 4(f). FRA cannot approve a Project that would use a Section 4(f) resource unless it determines there is no other feasible and prudent alternative and the project incorporates all possible planning to minimize harm, or FRA determines the impact to the resource is *de minimis*. Use of a Section 4(f) property occurs: (1) when land is permanently incorporated into a transportation project; (2) when there is a temporary occupancy of land that is adverse in terms of the statute's preservation purpose; or (3) when there is a constructive use (a project's proximity impacts are so severe that the protected activities, features, or attributes of a property are substantially impaired).

Pursuant to the requirements of Section 4(f), and consistent with 23 CFR Part 774, the EA included a Draft Section 4(f) Evaluation. FRA made the Draft Section 4(f) Evaluation available for public and agency review and comment on July 9, 2025, concurrent with the EA. On August 25, 2025, the Department of Interior (DOI) concurred with FRA's Section 4(f) use findings. The final Section 4(f) Findings for the Selected Alternative can be found in

Table 4-2 and the full Final Section 4(f) Evaluation can be found in Appendix B.

**Table 4-2. Section 4(f) Use Findings**

<b>Section 4(f) Property</b>	<b>Final Section 4(f) Use Finding</b>
Dale and Frances Archer Memorial Park	<i>No Use</i>
IL 53 (Alternate Route 66), Wilmington to Joliet	<i>De minimis</i>
Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery	<i>De minimis</i>
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie	Individual
Des Plaines State Fish and Wildlife Area	<i>De minimis</i>

FRA has determined there is no feasible and prudent alternative that completely avoids the use of Section 4(f) properties, and that the project includes all possible planning to minimize harm to the Section 4(f) properties resulting from the transportation use.

Alternative 1B, or the Selected Alternative, is the Least Overall Harm Alternative. Alternative 1B has lower relative severity of remaining harm to 4(f) properties because it does not result in a permanent visual obstruction of IL-53 (Alternate Route 66) and has a substantially lower cost than that of Alternative 2A.

## **4.5 Other Environmental Findings**

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Table 5-1 of the EA includes a summary of the environmental impacts of the Selected Alternative (Alternative 1B). Below is a summary of some of the key environmental findings.

**Air quality** – The emission increases for the Selected Alternative would not exceed the General Conformity De minimis thresholds, would not have insignificant local air quality impacts, and would have little or no change to Mobile Source Air Toxics (MSATs).

**Noise and Vibration** – The Selected Alternative has four moderate and six severe noise impacts when compared to the existing noise levels. One receptor would have vibration impacts.

**Migratory Birds** - The Selected Alternative will not result in a “taking” (killing, capturing, selling, trading, or transport) of protected migratory bird species as defined by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). Accordingly, FRA has no further obligations under the MBTA. If this changes, FRA will coordinate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine the most appropriate course of action.

**Visual** - The Selected Alternative would have no notable change to views

**Community** - No residential or business relocations are anticipated with the Selected Alternative. Two detached residential garages currently in the UPRR right-of-way would be removed in Elwood.

## 5.0 Conclusion

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FRA has carefully considered the Project record, including the EA and associated technical reports and analysis; the mitigation measures required; and the written and oral comments offered by agencies, stakeholders, and the public. Based on this consideration, FRA has determined the attached EA satisfies the requirements of NEPA (42 USC §§ 4321 et seq.), FHWA/FTA/FRA joint regulations implementing NEPA (23 CFR § 771), and other applicable environmental requirements. The Project, as presented and assessed in the EA, will not significantly impact the quality of the human or natural environment. In addition, the EA identifies measures, included in this FONSI, that would avoid, minimize and/or mitigate the adverse effects resulting from the Project. FRA concludes that the Elwood to Braidwood Track Construction Project is sufficiently analyzed in the attached EA and an Environmental Impact Statement is not required for the Project.



Stephanie B. Perez  
Chief, Environmental Review Division  
Federal Railroad Administration

Dec. 18, 2025

Date